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Negotiating with Iran

JAMES DOBBINS

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**Statement of James Dobbins¹
The RAND Corporation**

Negotiating with Iran²

**Before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs
United States House of Representatives**

November 7, 2007

There is a popular perception in the United States that in the aftermath of 9/11, the United States formed a coalition and overthrew the Taliban. Wrong. In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States joined an existing coalition which had been trying to overthrow the Taliban for much of a decade. The coalition consisted of India, Russia, Iran and the Northern Alliance. And with the addition of American airpower, that coalition succeeded in ousting the Taliban.

The success in quickly forming a successor regime was also thanks to this coalition. As the American representative to the Afghan opposition, I represented the US at the Bonn conference that met for that purpose. The conference had representation from all of the major elements of the Afghan opposition and from all of the principal regional states—the countries that had been playing the great game and tearing Afghanistan apart for 20 years—Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, and of course the United States..

At one point the U.N. had circulated the first draft of the Bonn declaration, which was to serve as Afghanistan's interim constitution. It was the Iranian envoy, Deputy Foreign Minister Javad Zarif who noted that this document made no mention of democratic elections. "Don't you think that the new Afghan regime should be committed to hold democratic elections?"

I allowed that this seemed reasonable suggestion. Washington was not on a democracy campaign at this point in time. My job was to get an agreement, and almost any agreement would do, so long as it resulted in an Afghan government that could replace the Taliban, unite the opposition, secure international support, cooperate in hunting down Al Qaeda remnants, and relieve the United States of the need to occupy and run the country.

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It was also the Iranians delegation that proposed that the document should commit the Afghans to cooperate against international terrorism.

At one point, I reproached my Iranian colleague because his foreign minister had been quoted the day before as saying that he didn't think any peacekeeping troops were necessary for Kabul.

"You and I have agreed that we really need a peacekeeping force in Kabul, I said. Why is your foreign minister being quoted to the contrary?"

"You can consider my Minister's statement a gesture of solidarity with Don Rumsfeld," Zarif replied with a grin, it then being generally known that Secretary Rumsfeld was unenthusiastic about deploying peacekeepers to Afghanistan.

"After all Jim, you and I are both way out in front of our instructions on this one, aren't we?" I had to admit this was true.

On the last night of the conference we'd agreed on everything except who was going to govern Afghanistan. We had the interim constitution, but we were still arguing about who was going to govern Afghanistan. The Northern Alliance was insisting upon occupying 18 of the 26 ministries and everyone else agreed that was too many. It wasn't going to be broadly based if the Northern Alliance, which represented maybe 30 or 40% of the population, got 75% of the ministries. German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder was due to arrive at 9am for the closing ceremony, but we had no agreement to sign.

And so at my suggestion Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN negotiator, got together all of the foreign representatives who were still awake—it was about 2 in the morning. We eventually assembled with the Russian, Indian, German and Iranian delegates, along with Brahimi and me. For two hours this group worked over the Northern Alliance representative, Yunnis Qanooni, each of us arguing, in turn, that he should agree to give up several Ministries. He remained obdurate. Finally. Zarif took him aside and whispering to him for a few moments, following which the Northern Alliance envoy returned to the table and said, "Okay, I agree. The other factions can have two more ministries. And we can create three more, which they can also have." We had a deal. Zarif had achieved the final breakthrough without which the Karzai government might never have been formed.

Four hours later the German Chancellor arrived and the Bonn agreement was signed.

My final report to the State Department read, “The late night session that preceded the successful conclusion of the Bonn conference underscored why the conference ultimately worked. Neighboring states, Western governments and the UN worked in tandem to be helpful at this meeting. Their combined weight, operating for the first time in a cohesive effort, succeeded in pushing the Afghans together.”

Iran’s positive contribution to stability in Afghanistan did not end with the Bonn Conference. Iran sent the most senior delegation at Karzai’s inauguration. Their foreign minister came. There had been some doubt about whether Ismail Khan, a warlord in the area closest to Iran, was going to support this settlement. The Iranian foreign minister landed in Herat, picked Khan up, put him on the plane and brought him to Kabul just to make sure no one doubted that he was going to support the Karzai.

At the Tokyo donors conference that came a few weeks later, Iran pledged \$500 million in assistance to Afghanistan, assistance which they’ve since delivered, which is a staggering amount for a non first-world country. The American pledge, by comparison, was all of \$290 million, little more than half that of Iran.

Several of the Iranian diplomats who had been in Bonn were with us again in Tokyo. Emerging from a larger gathering, one of them took me aside to reaffirm his governments desire to continue to cooperate on Afghanistan. I agreed that this would be desirable, but warned that Iranian behavior in other areas represented an obstacle to cooperation.

“We would like to discuss the other issues with you also” he replied.

“My brief only extends to Afghanistan”, I cautioned.

“We know that. We would like to work on these other issues with the appropriate people in your government”

“The Karine A incident was not helpful”, I said, referring to a Palestinian ship intercepted a few days earlier by the Israeli Navy on its way to Gaza loaded with several tons of Iranian origin weapons.

“We too are concerned about this”, my Iranian interlocutor said. “President Khatemi met earlier this week with the National Security Council. He asked whether any of the agency representatives present knew anything about this shipment. All of them denied any knowledge of

it. If your government has any information to the contrary it can provide us, that would be most helpful.”

On returning to Washington, I reported this conversation. In so far as I am aware, there was no response to the Iranian request for information. One week later, in a state of the Union address, President Bush included Iran, along with its arch enemy, Iraq in what he termed an “axis of evil”, implicitly threatening all both states, along with North Korea, with preemptive military action intended to halt their acquisition of weapons of mass destruction.

Two months later in Geneva, the Iranians asked to see me on the fringes of another multilateral meeting we were having about Afghanistan. They introduced me to an Iranian general, in full uniform, who had been the commander of their security assistance efforts for the Northern Alliance throughout the war. The General said that Iran was willing to contribute to an American led program to build a new Afghan National Army.

“We’re prepared to house and train up to 20,000 troops in a broader program under American leadership,” the General offered.

“Well, if you train some Afghan troops and we train some, might they not end up having incompatible military doctrine,” I responded, somewhat dubiously.

The general just laughed and he said, “Don’t worry; we’re still using the manuals you left behind in 1979.”

“Okay, so maybe they might have compatible doctrines but might they not have conflicting loyalties,” I responded, still not entirely convinced.

“Well, we trained, we equipped, and, by the way, we’re the ones who are still paying for the Afghan troops you’re still using in the southern part of the country to go after Taliban and Al Qaeda elements,.” the General replied. “Are you having any difficulty with their loyalty?”

I acknowledged that, insofar as I was aware, we were not. I said I would report the offer to Washington.

The Iranian proposal struck me as problematic in detail, but promising in its overall implications. Despite the General’s assurances, I could foresee problems in having Iran and the United States training different components of a new Afghan army. On the other hand, Iranian participation,

under American leadership, in a joint program of this sort would be a breathtaking departure after more than twenty years mutual hostility. It also represented a significant step beyond the quiet diplomatic cooperation we had achieved so far. Clearly, despite having been relegated by President Bush to the “axis of evil”, the Khatemi government wanted to deepen its cooperation with Washington, and was prepared to do so in a most overt and public manner.

Back home, I immediately went to see Secretary Powell.

“Very interesting,” he responded to my account of this conversation. “You need to brief Condi.”

And so I went to see Rice.

“Very interesting,” she said. “You need to talk to Don.”

Several days later Rice called a meeting with Secretaries Rumsfeld and Powell, among others. When we came to this item on the agenda, I again recounted my conversation with the Iranians. When I finished, there were no comments and no questions. After a brief pause, seeing no one ready to take up the issue, the meeting moved on to the next item on its agenda. Insofar as I am aware, the issue was never again discussed, and the Iranians never received a response.

A year later, in the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq the Iranians came forward with an even more sweeping offer, one that other witnesses here today are in a better position than I to detail.

It is no coincidence that both these Iranian overtures came in the aftermath of an American intervention on their borders. In both cases, those American moves left the Iranian regime grateful and fearful. They were grateful that the United States had taken down their two principal regional opponents, and they were fearful that they might be next, seeing as they did, American troops to their North, in Central Asia, East, in Afghanistan, South, in the Gulf and West, in Iraq. They were surrounded.

Unfortunately, if the Iranian regime was feeling grateful and fearful, the American government, and not just the government, but the country as a whole was feeling supremely confident. In late 2001, we had overthrown Mullah Omar in a lightning campaign, and then in 2003 had done the same with Saddam. We were on a role, acutely conscious of being the world’s only superpower. There seemed nothing America could not accomplish. I suspect that the Administration therefore saw no rush in responding to Iranian overtures. As Afghanistan was stabilized and Iraq

democratized, the American position could only grow stronger. In good time, Washington could deal with the Iranian regime. Teheran's offers were becoming steadily better. Why not wait a while longer?

Of course, events did not move in that direction. Since the last Iranian overtures of 2003, it is Teheran's position that has strengthened, and hardened. In contrast Washington's position has weakened and hardened. American difficulties in Iraq are the principal cause of this shift.

Iran and other neighboring states bear some responsibility for the current conflict in Iraq, but the United States bears even greater responsibility for thinking that the influence of these countries could be safely ignored. If a decade of nation building experience should have taught anything, it was the impossibility of holding together disintegrating societies without the cooperation of adjoining states. Neighboring states simply enjoy too much access and too much influence, by reason of proximity, personal relationships and cultural affinity, to be ignored. Neither can these governments be persuaded to eschew interference. After all, it is they, not more distant countries like the United States that will get the refugees, the crime, the terrorism, the endemic disease, and the economic disruption caused by having a failed state on their doorstep. Neighboring states cannot afford to remain uninvolved, and they will not.

Unfortunately, left to their own devices, neighboring governments will tend to exacerbate the disintegration they would generally prefer to avoid. In any failing state, all claimants for power seek foreign sponsors, and all neighboring states tend to back favorites in this contest. In backing rival factions, regional governments feed the conflict and accelerate a breakup they do not seek. This can be prevented only if neighboring governments can be persuaded to exert their influence along convergent, rather than divergent lines, pressing the local political leaders to coalesce rather than to fight.

American success in ending the Bosnian civil war in 1995 depended upon bringing its neighbors, Serbia and Croatia, who were fighting a proxy war there, into the negotiating process. Those states, and their leaders, were guilty of the genocide America was trying to stop. Yet Washington engaged these leaders, gave them a privileged status in the negotiations, and then worked with them to implement the peace agreement. President Milosevic and Tudjman both won subsequent elections, based in part on the prestige they had garnered through this American connection. Had the Clinton Administration not been willing to pay that price, however, the war in Bosnia would have continued.

America's rapid success in toppling the Taliban and replacing it with a broadly based, moderate successor also depended heavily upon the support American military and diplomatic efforts received from all the neighboring states, notably Iran. There was no attempt to replicate this in Iraq, and to be truthful, there was no possibility of so doing, given broader American intentions in the region.

The United States had not invaded Afghanistan with the intention of making it a model for Central Asia, with the objective of thereby undermining the legitimacy of neighboring governments and ultimately seeing them replaced. Had that been America's goal in Afghanistan, we never would have been offered bases in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, over flight rights from Pakistan, and Russian and Iranian diplomatic support at the Bonn Conference. By contrast, the United States did invade Iraq with the stated intention of turning it into a model for the Middle East, thereby undermining domestic support for all the neighboring regimes in the hope of their ultimate demise. This was not a project any of those governments was likely to buy into. And none of them have, not even our democratic ally, Turkey.

American military power may prevent the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan from getting much worse, but only diplomacy is going to make it dramatically better. Iran is not the only key to regional support, but it is an essential one.

Unfortunately, the relationship between the United States and Iran bears an enormous historical burden. If there are two countries in the world with good reason to hate each other, it is Iran and America. Twenty-seven years ago Iranian revolutionaries seized the American Embassy in Teheran and held its staff hostage for fifteen months. The revolutionary Iranian regime has subsequently been implicated in the 1983 attack upon a Marine encampment in Beirut that killed 242 American servicemen. In 1996 Iran was again implicated in the bombing of a US Army barracks in Saudi Arabia that had killed 19 and injured 500. Iran has continued to provide support to groups in Lebanon and occupied Palestine that conduct attacks on Israel. More recently, Iran has been arming militia and insurgent groups in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Iranians, for their part, have an imposing set of grievances. In 1953 the CIA helped instigate a coup against the democratically elected government of Mohammed Mossadeq, installing in its place the autocratic regime of Shah Reza Pahlavi. After the 1979 revolution overthrew the Shah, the United States imposed an embargo on trade with Iran. In 1980 Saddam Hussein launched an invasion of Iran. That war lasted eight years and killed some 500,000 Iranians. The United States worked with Sunni states of the region that were providing various forms of support to Iraq, the aggressor state. Saddam's forces used poison gas against Iranian troops. The United States

voiced no protest. In 1988 the U.S. Navy shot down an Iranian civil airliner flying over the Persian Gulf, killing 290 innocent crew and passengers.

Twenty seven years of non-communication has embedded this sense of mutual grievance more deeply in the Iranian and American national psyches. It is thus unrealistic to expect that our differences can be overcome in a single comprehensive breakthrough. It is even more foolish to believe that non-communication can advance that process, that somehow, if we just hold our breath long enough, the Iranians will finally give in. Those who argue against establishing normal communications between Washington and Teheran often maintain that contacts would be fruitless. The real concern, however, is just the reverse, that communication would produce accommodation. Hard liners in Iran fear that normal relations with Washington would cause a decline in revolutionary fervor, thereby undermining the legitimacy of their regime, which rests heavily upon its anti-American credentials. Conversely, opponents of normalization in the United States fear this would legitimize the regime in Teheran, and make its demise less likely.

Americans are fond of characterizing the Iranian regime as a fundamentalist theocracy. The truth is more complex. Iran isn't Switzerland, but it is rather more democratic than Egypt and less fundamentalist than Saudi Arabia, two of America's most important allies in the region. Iranian women vote, drive automobiles, attend university in large numbers, and lead successful professional lives. Iran's Parliament and President are popularly elected. Elections take place on schedule, the outcomes are not foreordained, and the results do make a difference, perhaps not as much of a difference as we would like, but enough to make the process worth understanding a good deal better than we do. Even the Supreme leader is elected to a fixed (renewable) term by a council of clerics who are in turn popularly elected by universal adult suffrage. The last election to that body was a setback to Ahmedinijad. Presidential elections produce even more meaningful swings, as can those to the parliament. Yes the system is rigged, but not the point where it becomes a complete sham, as is the case in many other Middle Eastern elections, when such are held at all.

It is time to apply to Iran the policies which won the Cold War, liberated the Warsaw Pact, and reunited Europe: détente and containment, communication whenever possible, and confrontation whenever necessary. We spoke to Stalin's Russia. We spoke to Mao's China. In both cases, greater mutual exposure changed their system, not ours. It's time to speak to Iran, unconditionally, and comprehensively.